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ABSTRACT

The demand for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes and for qualified teachers has greatly increased in recent years. Professional development for teachers of adult ESL learners is crucial. Despite their numbers, adult ESL programs, learners, and teachers remain somewhat marginal in adult education policy and structure, and some believe that the field itself has a low status. Many adult ESL teachers work under less than optimal teaching conditions. They come to the field with varied backgrounds. There is a high turnover rate. A wide range of instructional contexts and content focuses make uniform professional development challenging. There are limited opportunities and funding for professional development for teachers of adult ESL learners. Effective staff development practices should do the following: be ongoing, extensive, and based in solid theory; involve teachers in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of training efforts; provide opportunities for teachers to try new skills on the job and engage teachers in feedback and followup activities; and include time for inquiry, reflection, and collaboration. Recent professional development efforts that show promise include: using technology-based approaches, fostering reflective practice, promoting professional communities, and focusing on professional development within other national efforts. Resources are listed. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (SM)

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Professional Development and Adult English Language Instruction

NATIONAL CENTER FOR ESL LITERACY EDUCATION

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Professional Development and Adult English Language Instruction

NATIONAL CENTER FOR ESL LITERACY EDUCATION

The demand for English as a second language (ESL) classes and for qualified personnel to work with adult English language learners has greatly increased in recent years. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education reports that in 1999, adults seeking English language and literacy instruction represented the largest segment (37%) of federally funded adult education enrollment. Much of this increase is due to immigration patterns. States not historically associated with immigrant influxes such as Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, and Tennessee are experiencing huge growth in immigrant populations.

To meet this demand, more teachers are needed. New teachers are entering the field, experienced teachers are being asked to take on greater challenges, and adult basic education teachers are now working with English language learners in classes along with native English speakers. Professional development is crucial for these teachers.

Trends and Issues

Despite their numbers, adult ESL programs, learners, and teachers are still somewhat marginal in adult education policy and structure. In addition, many adult ESL teachers express a feeling that the field itself has a low status. Practitioners often work in cramped conditions with limited resources and materials. Most adult ESL teachers are part-time, hourly employees with minimal or no employment benefits. They come to the field with varied backgrounds, training, and experiences. There is a high turnover rate. A wide range of instructional contexts and content focuses (e.g., workplace, academic, non-academic, life skills, and volunteer programs) make uniform professional development challenging. Certification and training requirements for teachers vary. There are limited opportunities and funding for professional development, and many teachers who work on part-time schedules or in isolated programs have difficulty connecting with other teachers and participating in a professional community.

Best Practices

Studies of professional development efforts in adult education reveal that effective staff development practices for adult educators

- are ongoing, extensive, and based in solid theory.
- involve teachers themselves in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the training efforts.
- provide teachers with opportunities to try new skills on the job and then engage in feedback and follow-up activities.
- include time for inquiry, reflection, and collaboration.

Given the realities of the field of adult ESL education, creating professional development opportunities that meet these criteria is challenging. Recent professional development efforts that show promise include

- building teachers' knowledge in the following areas: adult learning principles (in ESL contexts), second language acquisition processes, effective second language teaching approaches, and techniques for working with multicultural groups;
- exploring continued, ongoing professional development formats with opportunities for application of new ideas, collaboration, and feedback (as well as integrating one-time workshops and conferences into these formats);
- using technology-based approaches (e.g., CD-ROMs, teleconferences, synchronous and asynchronous Internet-based courses, television broadcasts) to offer professional development options that optimize financial resources, reach scattered teachers and programs, and promote collaboration and community;

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- fostering reflective practice through individual or group models;
- promoting professional communities through efforts such as mentoring, practitioner research groups, reading circles, or peer teaching;
- encouraging teachers to bring theory, research, and practice together through practitioner research or joint projects between researchers and teachers;
- developing new models for credentialing and certification based on the skills and knowledge that adult ESL teachers need to be able to demonstrate;
- focusing on professional development within other national efforts such as the *Adult ESOL Program Standards* created by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and *A Research Agenda for Adult ESL* by the National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE).

Conclusion

Policy makers and funders must acknowledge and address constraints of time and financial resources available for professional development for teachers of adult English language learners. State program administrators, who are responsible for setting funding allocation guidelines, must make difficult decisions about how to support professional development. (One state, for example, decided to place limits on the number of adult English language learners it would serve through its programs in order to make more money available for professional development for instructors.) Until discussions of these critical issues take place, professional development will remain a marginalized activity for instructors, and the quality of instruction for learners will suffer.

Resources

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